

Liberating your young child's potential

It is not by chance that the human child remains dependent on its mother for the longest time of any creature on earth, nor that many cultures traditionally celebrate 'coming of age' at 21. An adult human takes a long time to 'cultivate', physically, emotionally and mentally.

A well-balanced person is someone in which *thinking* (intellect), *feeling* (sensitivity/empathy) and *willing* (willpower/self-determination) are working together harmoniously. Alternatively, we have the absent-minded professor in his ivory tower, forgetting to eat; the over-sized jock, all brawn and no brain, willfully indulging his senses; the bohemian artist with little connection to the practical or intellectual. These are clearly exaggerated pictures of one-sided people, but how much does society do to *integrate* all these three aspects in modern-day childrearing?

Looking closely at human development, we see three main developmental stages unfolding at definable periods during these first 21 years. At each crucial stage the child has quite specific environmental needs if it is to develop its optimum capacity, whether physically, emotionally or mentally. Moreover, should any of these windows (of opportunity) be missed, it is extremely difficult to recoup this development in later life.

Between birth and seven years the child's concerted energies are directed towards completing his **physical** body. Organs are perfected, skeletal tissue hardened and fine and gross motor skills achieved. An infant's limbs are in perpetual motion - a direct manifestation of *will*. Controlling the head, turning over, sitting upright, standing and walking are all achievements of *will* that we as parents delight in as our children grow.

Since children are as absorbent as sponges, it is important that we guard against *over* stimulation - loud noises, busy shopping malls, bright colours - and later, the *wrong* stimuli, i.e. inappropriate content.

Around age 1 the child is able to walk erect. From this new perspective, his energies are channeled towards the acquisition of language, starting with 'naming'. The child is now sorting the world and trying to understand it - the first phase of *thinking*. Soon after we hear the word 'why?' I remember my daughter asking me "Why is the sky blue?" I found myself sifting my brain for the lessons I had on atmospheric conditions, but then realized she wasn't ready for all that erudite stuff. She was quite satisfied with the explanation that the sky is a great blue blanket stretching over us and keeping us safe. And to the question "Why is it raining?", I told her the angels were watering the flowers.....

Year three brings self-awareness. No longer does 'Mwangi want milk', "**I** want milk'. At this stage the child could be called egotistical if it wasn't for the fact that he perceives no boundaries between himself and the world. This is the time of the 'terrible twos' when 'NO' reverberates around the house! The initial awareness of *self* is a necessary step for *thinking* - an internalized process, and perhaps the child is saying "Step back and give me some space!" To misquote Descartes, "I am therefore I think!"

Fortunately the next stage brings reconciliation with the world as *fantasy* awakens. Offer a two year old a bowl of sand and say it's a birthday cake, and she is apt to put it in her mouth. Offer it to a three year old and she may look quizzically at you and ask 'It's make believe, right?' Offer it to a four year old and she knows it is a play cake, and she'll decorate it with sticks and leaves and call her friends for a party!

If *fantasy* is allowed to ripen side by side with *thinking*, these two faculties mature into *creative thinking*, a capacity to visualize not only how things are but also how things *might* be. Emphasis on rational, intellectual thought *too early* leads to stress, burnout and the inability to think in older school children.

Albert Einstein once said, “When I examine myself and my methods of thought, I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than any talent for abstract, positive thinking.”

To foster a healthy fantasy life, give a child *natural* objects to play with rather than limit his fantasy with defined objects i.e. cold, ‘dead’, plastic toys. A handful of chairs, some cloths and ropes can, for example, become any vehicle the child wants. At four, fantasy is dependent on such external stimuli; by five years, the child comes to the playroom with an idea in mind, and by age six, she takes a few rudimentary props and talks out her play.

The newborn imagination needs *nourishing*, and is often stifled in the dull, educational environments prevalent in our present schools and kindergartens. Young children are easily *over stimulated* with premature abstraction (numbers and letters), primary colours and poster-packed walls, leaving them feeling frazzled and fraught. Telling fairy tales, for example, – *fair -i.e.* as in *good* - not only stimulates the imagination at this time, but also lays the foundation of the child’s *inner moral* development. Mastering academics too early, imagination can be aborted before it is born.

The young child learns in an *unconscious* manner through *imitation*. They want to copy everything you do. But in today's homes and kindergartens adults dash from one task to another, and a sense of hurry permeates life. It is difficult for a child to learn concentration, self-discipline and perseverance in this way. When children imitate hurrying adults, nervousness enters them, which may appear later as a superficial quality in the young person's thinking.

As the child approaches Standard 1 he loses confidence that he can, through *imitation*, do whatever we do. The child begins to see us as teachers who can teach him to do things. The child is ready to learn and looks for a *loving authority*, from whom he will also readily accept boundaries.

By year seven, the hardest substance has been forged, her second teeth, and, with the physical body thus completed, her energies are liberated for a new phase of growth. Her memory is no longer purely associative and her learning no longer purely imitative. And, as heart and lungs now settle into a regular rhythm, the child’s love of rhythmic games, such as jumping rope, hand clapping, counting and recitation, can also be used by her teacher to both their advantage.

The playful fantasy of early childhood seems to disappear around age six or seven. Actually though it goes through a metamorphosis and appears as the ability to see pictures or images within her own mind's eye. In this period of seven to fourteen, the *feeling* life is the strongest, and all that is taught through imagination and the arts penetrates deeply. Through mythologies, great stories and stirring biographies, idealism is awakened in the child and flowers in adolescence.

Around nine children become more acutely aware of their individuality and, in the ensuing years, push at their boundaries, testing authority. They need role models in their lives who they can sense are knowledgeable as well as worthy of respect.

In the years 14 to 21 cognitive and intellectual *thinking* awaken strongly and it is important that adolescents go through the process of observation, deduction and conclusion *by themselves*. Only thus can they develop independent judgment, and **not** by being fed finished statements and secondhand book-knowledge. Furthermore, it is only with this maturation of thought and judgment that a young person can be held to account for wrongdoing, *and at no time before*. Something we should bear in mind when disciplining our children.

A human child is like the seed of a tree - the adult tree is already encapsulated within it. All the seedling needs is the right temperature, the right moisture and the right nutrients in the soil to develop to its optimum potential. The natural growth stimuli needed by the tree - sun, rain and soil - *do not*, however, readily translate into unnatural, fast food, nor the electronic media of modern society, devoid of human interaction or appropriate role models.

Keep exposure to the media, i.e. television, movies, videos, to a minimum so that the child's *fantasy* is not overwhelmed by someone else's images, and so that the child's *will* is not deadened by hours of passive watching. Finally, bite your tongue every time you want to explain something to a young child. Allow them the joy of discovering their own answers - through play.

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